



Biblical Seminary of Colombia: Practices for Holistic Formation

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Abstract

This article addresses some of the practices of the Biblical Seminary of Colombia (FUSBC) in relation to holistic formation, with special attention to the pandemic's impact on these practices. It presents a brief historical overview, describes FUSBC's approach to holistic training, analyzes FUSBC's evaluation and accompaniment methods, and narrates changes driven by COVID-19.

Introduction

Holistic formation is a recurring goal within theological education in Latin America. This goal has commonly been achieved by intertwining engagement with Scripture, relevance to context, character formation, and community life. Recently, technological advances and changes in education brought about by online teaching modalities have challenged these practices of theological education, in which faculty and staff had felt a certain degree of comfort. Then, in 2020-2022, the COVID-19 pandemic created additional challenges for many institutions that had not yet determined how to integrate holistic formation with online education, but that were forced to use online education to cope with the pandemic. This paper addresses questions about holistic formation's incorporation in online teaching, FUSBC's methods of evaluation and accompaniment in the holistic formation process, and the pandemic's affects (current and potential) on the institution. Although many of COVID's impacts are not yet visible, this article aims to show how, before the pandemic and during it, holistic formation continued to be built through intentional practices in student training and community life.

Background

History and courses

The Biblical Seminary of Colombia (known by its Spanish acronym, FUSBC) is a Christian confessional institution located in the city of Medellín, in northwestern Colombia. FUSBC was founded in 1944 by the Oriental Missionary Society (OMS, now One Mission Society). Because of World War II, WHO missionaries left Japan and Korea and moved to Colombia. These missionaries established FUSBC as a training site for pastors and lay people of the growing Colombian evangelical church. During its first two decades, FUSBC became a common meeting place for the Colombian church, a fact that strengthened its interdenominational character.

Throughout its history and courses, FUSBC has focused primarily on the study of the Bible. It offers evangelical and interdenominational education for the Colombian church. It serves over 40 denominations and close to 40 independent churches, and it receives students from a spectrum that includes traditional Colombian churches and neo-Pentecostals.

In the 1970s, FUSBC conducted a self-assessment inspired by the question of how best to respond to the Colombian context, especially to the challenges of liberation theology. This self-assessment led to FUSBC's growth in subsequent years in physical facilities, faculty, and a plan to achieve university status. The decision to seek this status came partly in response to national changes in Colombia, including the emergence of a new national constitution that enshrined freedom of religion. FUSBC completed this process and became a formal university in 2000.

After this and under the supervision of the Ministry of National Education of Colombia, in 2002, FUSBC accredited its first university program, the degree in theology. Right now, the face-to-face version of this program has about 65 students; the online version has about 120 students.

In 2010, FUSBC offered its first postgraduate course specializing in ethics and Christian thought. This specialization was also the first program that FUSBC offered completely online. In 2014, following a curricular reform, the theology program was also offered online. Finally, at the end of 2021, FUSBC received approval to create a Master's Degree in Biblical Interpretation. About 8 students are in the first cohort.

In addition, FUSBC offers professional training and continuing education programs. It reaches close to 2,000 people through these short courses, workshops, and diplomas.

As indicated in the brief narrative above, FUSBC has become a pioneer in Latin America in online teaching. This has happened thanks to alliances with other institutions at a global level that have supported the development of online education during the last 15 years.

Contextual challenges

FUSBC has faced different challenges in its context. A polarized church is one of these challenges. The church in Colombia over the years has been divided in its response to doctrinal, political, and social issues. This polarization affects the seminary, as it seeks to train students from many different groups. FUSBC seeks to maintain balance as an interfaith institution, but that is not easy.

Another challenge comes from outside the Christian community, as FUSBC considers how the church can respond theologically to facets of Colombian society. People are dealing with social progressivism, globalization, international agendas, and internal political changes. Forming leaders for a church that faces these realities and at the same time giving academic and theological responses to these realities from the faculty are opportunities and challenges for FUSBC.

A final challenge for FUSBC is financial stability. How does the seminary support education in the midst of a complex economic context? Colombian Christians do not tend to prioritize theological education. This prospect leads to low student numbers at FUSBC and will require the institution to reconsider long-term financial viability.

Holistic Training at FUSBC

How FUSBC defines formation

FUSBC aims to train students to transform their personal, family, and social environments in light of the Gospel. It seeks to form ministers for the pastoral, educational, and social tasks necessary to help God's people fulfill their mission in the world. It seeks to produce theologians committed both to the church's numerical growth and the deepening of believers' faith.

This work occurs within two realities: the theological task itself, with its universal character, and the particular Latin American (and, more specifically, Colombian) context. Although globalization brings advances in economic prosperity, material comfort, communication, and information

technologies, it does not necessarily produce ethical or equitable societies. Corruption, inequality, consumerism, violence, and disrespect for property and human life mark the Colombian situation.

These tensions challenge the church and have motivated FUSBC to design a curriculum that helps combat disastrous behaviors and thought patterns. FUSBC establishes in its development plan the need for narratives that help students to live in the midst of chaos. In relation to this, a religious education can form character and provide an identity committed to building community in the midst of differences (see FUSBC's strategic plan). To form students this way, FUSBC offers a holistic vision for theological formation.

However, the means to make this vision a reality differ across programs, modalities, and levels. I will give examples in the section that follows, but here I want to emphasize that, in face-to-face programs, teaching is done holistically. FUSBC's face-to-face programs are usually offered as residential, although they do not fully meet this definition, because almost half of the students do not live on campus but reside around the city. Despite not living directly on campus, students in "residential" programs have continuous interaction with teachers and the rest of the academic community, in such a way that the particularities of development and coexistence that are common in residential programs are emulated. Thus, in FUSBC's face-to-face programs, teachers can connect academic knowledge and community life holistically. These connections result in spiritual formation that occurs through ministry practice on campus. The faculty works with students to help them grow spiritually, explicitly teaching them in interpersonal relationships and through intellectual development.

In online programs, FUSBC must manage different challenges in pursuit of students' holistic formation. Online students have access to the same training elements in terms of learning outcomes, content, learning activities, and mentoring by teachers and the online support team. Although, in theory, the experience has the same components as the face-to-face programs, mentoring is much more difficult because of the physical and temporal distances inherent in online learning. These distances do not allow students to participate in the community life developed on FUSBC's campus. Faced with this reality, FUSBC's online program connects students to mentors within their own local communities; this connection allows students to maintain firm ties with their community and to learn aspects of ministerial practice and spiritual formation. (In a few necessary cases, FUSBC assigns a full-time faculty member the function of actively accompanying a student through regular meetings via Zoom

or in person.) In addition, online students have a mentor at FUSBC who accompanies them in their academic processes from a pastoral perspective.

Thus, FUSBC offers two different mentoring figures. The spiritual formation mentor is not necessarily linked to FUSBC but accompanies the student throughout his or her formation process, reports to FUSBC, and receives a work plan from FUSBC. The academic mentor is a FUSBC faculty member, part of FUSBC's online program, and accompanies students via online tools. All students at FUSBC have a spiritual formation mentor, but only online students have two mentors like this.

Context and formation

Holistic formation must respond to contextual factors. Within the Colombian context, FUSBC takes two cultural components to help shape formation, regardless of level or modality:

Relationships: Life in Colombia is inherently relational. Therefore, FUSBC students must be formed by relationships and for relationships. To this end, FUSBC emphasizes community service. All students in the face-to-face program participate in service for at least 16 hours per semester. In this service, the student is formed in his character and his understanding of Christian ministry through the performance of a trade or work on campus. Similarly, students participate in community spiritual formation during prayer times, devotionals, and worship in the chapel. They also participate in cultural activities, such as a night that celebrates the food and cultural elements typical of each student's region, or a night for games and sports.

Christian tradition: One difficulty for FUSBC in relation to holistic formation comes from Colombian evangelical culture. In the Colombian environment, spirituality is understood purely as individual discipline. Spirituality only takes on a communal component in corporate worship. This perspective causes believers to generate checklists for spirituality that usually include three components: Bible reading, prayer, and gathering. Such a practice can generate a false sense of control over one's own spirituality. Individuals tend to ignore other spiritual disciplines, and this fact clouds the development of holistic Christian maturity.

FUSBC seeks to respond to this situation in its study plans. Two learning outcomes have been developed to address them and promote comprehensive training. Students should:

- Live and act alongside others in theological work environments in ways that evince relational values.

- Demonstrate in reflections, attitudes, and behaviors a conviction of faith that arises from the internalization of a Christian worldview.

The development of these learning outcomes can be evidenced through the ministerial practices that all students, both face-to-face and online, must develop during their courses. For example, when faculty evaluate students' ministerial practice at the end of each semester, they expect to see a positive assessment of a student's relationships within their faith community. Also, in the spiritual formation journal that each student develops alongside his ministerial practice, he is expected to reflect on his conviction of faith in the face of the challenges that he faces at personal, family, ecclesial, and social levels. Finally, in that end-of-semester evaluation, faculty evaluate students' attitudes and behaviors – not just their intellectual growth.

In general, FUSBC believes that holistic training should involve the whole community, especially teachers, but not only them. Everyone in the FUSBC community contributes to students' training. Of course, the faculty is more actively involved by interacting with students, testing them, and tracking how they grow in knowledge and faith. The faculty guides the ministerial practice workshops; furthermore, teachers open their houses to student "nephews." In addition, in FUSBC's approach, administrative staff seek to take a formative attitude to interactions with students. In online programs, administrators are less visible, and students interact more with their academic mentors. However, whether online or in person, the community is an important part of FUSBC's formation.

Examples of training in face-to-face programs

The most important aspect of holistic formation occurs within the ministerial practice plan. Under this plan, in each of the program's nine semesters, each student completes an internship at a local church or religious organization. This internship must be related to the semester's topics. During ministerial practice, a mentor assigned by the church (or provided by the seminary) accompanies each student. This mentor must be of the same sex as the student and must be at least ten years older than the student. To evaluate this process, at the end, the student writes a report that includes a reflection on his progress in the disciplines of ministerial practice. The church (or organization) also submits a report to the seminary on the student's progress.

In addition, during those nine semesters, each student must develop a spiritual formation project that has to do with one of FUSBC's six institu-

tional values: love, justice, integrity, humility, gratitude, and holiness. FUSBC also provides weekly orientations for students through a faculty-led workshop. During these workshops, students exchange information about their studies, and the teacher provides feedback.

A second strategy orients students in face-to-face programs towards community life. This strategy integrates various approaches, including a weekly community-wide service project and activities with focus groups (i.e. singles, couples, women, etc.). FUSBC also collaborates with singles and families through its “nephew plan,” in which a family receives a single person by providing one meal per week and possibly other services. These strategies derive from the belief that sharing in community contributes to spiritual formation. As students live alongside faculty, administrators, and other students on a small campus, they learn how Christian love can be modeled on a day-to-day basis.

Finally, the classroom incorporates spiritual formation, as faculty integrate personal development with course content. This development has a low impact on each student’s grade, but it is part of every end-of-semester review conducted by the faculty. In individual cases, teachers provide pastoral accompaniment; this can occur formally, through the Dean’s office, or informally, at the initiative of the faculty. Together, these examples illustrate how FUSBC’s face-to-face programs encourage students to develop and address personal and contextual concerns.

Examples of training in online programs

FUSBC’s online programs also offer strategies for comprehensive training. As in residential programs, for online programs, ministerial practice is the priority. Formation for students in online programs follows the same pattern as the face-to-face programs described above, but of course students are involved in their work in their home communities.

As mentioned above, FUSBC provides mentors for students in online programs. These mentors differ from those who accompany students’ ministerial practice work. They offer quick, direct, continuous contact between online students and FUSBC. They accompany students throughout their courses and refer cases that require additional guidance to other professors.

Online students have the advantage of maintaining their roots in their ecclesial communities of origin. The fact that they can carry out their studies in their place of origin – with their families, friends, churches, workplaces, etc. – allows them to put into practice what they have

learned more immediately. Because students may already know their mentors from their community, those mentors can play a greater role in student development (rather than students having to build relationships with new mentors on the FUSBC campus, as in the face-to-face programs).

These elements intertwine with students' academic development. Each semester, online students participate in a number of subjects in which they maintain contact with the teacher through the educational platform and with their classmates through the educational platform and WhatsApp groups initiated by FUSBC but managed by the students themselves. Classroom study takes place as the student participates in weekly synchronous meetings, works in his context, and takes asynchronous evaluations. A weekly format has been chosen because it allows faster follow-up and gives visibility to students' absences so that FUSBC faculty can more quickly note which students need special attention.

Assessment

At FUSBC, evaluation is a fundamental part of formation. FUSBC evaluates both its own practices and those of its students. I will share two of FUSBC's evaluation strategies and one concern.

First, as part of curricular improvements, FUSBC evaluates the Colombian context. The faculty and board participate in this process, which listens to faculty, administrators, students, alumni, and stakeholders in individual churches and in society. FUSBC uses a PEST matrix for this evaluation, with two additional elements, so it is called PEST+2. This matrix evaluates the political, economic, social, and technological realities of Colombia; FUSBC has also added religion and education. After FUSBC uses the PEST+2 matrix to assess its context, it considers how to respond over the next decade. How will the country develop? How will the comprehensive training of FUSBC evolve in response? As a community we know that we are not only training for the present but for the future.

Along with the PEST+2 evaluation, FUSBC is evaluated by the Colombian national government. As an official institution, FUSBC must meet certain standards. The FUSBC community sees internal evaluation that is reported to an external entity as a normal and healthy practice. The motto of the national accreditation agency of Colombia is "Say what you do, do what you say, show it and improve it." This motto has pushed FUSBC to improve the documentation of processes and review of practices so that students receive more consistent training.

In these two modalities of institutional evaluation, some at FUSBC are still concerned that we are only reporting on activity. Sometimes these evaluations must proceed so quickly that we cannot reflect carefully enough on what is working (or not). FUSBC delivers reports four times a year on its activities. All stakeholders of the institution (staff, students, alumni) participate in these reports. In addition, students evaluate each class each time it is offered, and teachers evaluate each student at the end of each semester. Each teacher is evaluated and conducts a self-assessment each year. So many evaluations generate an enormous amount of information that can be difficult to process and that may not allow for careful thought leading to improvement.

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged almost every aspect of life in every corner of our society. Theological education was not immune. Between March 2020 and December 2022, FUSBC had to respond to the pandemic's challenges on two levels.

As mentioned above, FUSBC had offered online education long before the pandemic, so when the pandemic started, curricula, assignments, communication methods, teaching platforms, etc., were already in place. Indeed, since 2006, teachers have been trained in the use of technology for teaching, both by the national government and by the institution. This meant that the FUSBC faculty already had adequate skills in handling educational technologies for online teaching. So when Colombia declared a health emergency in March 2020, FUSBC's courses went online.

All teaching in face-to-face programs moved to Zoom in 2020. Faculty tried to keep the same online class schedule as in-person, though activities like group work and library research had to be modified. Taken together, the face-to-face program emulated face-to-face work as much as possible online and sought to return to face-to-face learning as quickly as possible. In fact, at the end of January 2021, FUSBC was one of the first higher education institutions in Colombia to resume face-to-face teaching.

Of course, while the in-person program had to adjust, the pre-existing online program continued with its normal activities. However, the faculty already teaching online was overburdened during the pandemic. This burden happened as synchronous meetings with students became more frequent, and as students already in online programs wanted more synchronous meetings than originally planned for the online program.

That is to say, the online student body saw in Zoom and similar tools a possibility of having a closer and more continuous contact with teachers and took the initiative to request it – yet, as the weeks went by, these meetings began to be a burden for both students and teachers, who saw the number of technology-mediated encounters increase in both seminary and church settings.

After this rapid response to the situation created by the pandemic, FUSBC encountered longer-term challenges for its development. First, students in the face-to-face program began to question the need to attend all classes face-to-face. These questions have put pressure on teachers to make in-person class time truly valuable to students.

Also, although FUSBC faculty were already trained in online teaching, FUSBC's technology infrastructure struggled to support so much online learning. FUSBC did not have enough technical capacity to allow online teaching to continue to grow. Therefore, FUSBC created a hybrid teaching modality in which online and face-to-face students participate in synchronous classroom meetings. Managing students online and in person at the same time has been a challenge for teachers and has changed the dynamics of the classroom. Teachers do not have time to create two sets of content for two sets of students; this has also been a challenge. However, the hybrid modality has provided greater financial support for some courses by increasing enrollments (without affecting the healthy limits of teachers). Additionally, the Colombian government now officially recognizes hybrid courses. This recognition allowed FUSBC to move its Master's in Biblical Interpretation to a hybrid modality in which students on and off campus can learn in the same program.

Third, the pandemic has forced FUSBC to think about how each student is mentored outside of the classroom. Classroom time shapes some components of the student's life, but other aspects of ministerial development require intentional conversations about vocational guidance. Especially in the face-to-face programs, students have found few opportunities for service in the church. Therefore, students – and churches – need more mentoring on how to make the most of ministerial practice. FUSBC is already seeking to address this gap; for example, we started a vocation seedbed that allows younger students to identify their vocation and its relationship to the church.

A fourth challenge has arrived for FUSBC's online program. The pandemic accelerated advances in online learning globally. Due to these advances, students expect online learning to be presented with a higher technological standard. This is not a problem of content but of format. Students expect more synchronous meetings and video conferencing,

but FUSBC programs were originally designed to be asynchronous. This is a component that is being worked on in the current curricular reform, seeking a balance between asynchronous and synchronous in the virtual program and a greater interrelation through the hybrid approach between the two programs (face-to-face and online).

Ultimately, the pandemic created an economic challenge for FUSBC. Churches and students saw their income drop dramatically during the pandemic. This financial adjustment resulted in fewer people enrolling in FUSBC. Therefore, the lower enrollments, in addition to the low technological capacity of FUSBC, threaten FUSBC's long-term sustainability. And more students are seeking counseling to deal with mental health crises, but FUSBC's faculty has not grown, so the institution struggles to support students well.

Conclusion

FUSBC has sought throughout its history to provide holistic formation to its students as part of its commitment to serve God, the church, and society. FUSBC seeks to incorporate the entire academic community in student formation, whether students are in person or online. Recognizing that local churches are training agents as well, we seek to build close working relationships with local churches.

These training processes have been challenged by online learning during the pandemic. FUSBC's experience with online education before the pandemic enabled us to offer good education during lockdowns; however, the pandemic's effects have created larger challenges that we need to address. Some challenges are already being addressed, including changing learning outcomes and modalities adjustments, but others are still in the works, as they require more interaction with the church. No matter the challenges, despite the environment's changing realities, FUSBC is still committed to form students who serve God, the church, and society.

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